

# GLACIER'S GATEWAY GARDEN

Norma Sangray's yard  
is a favorite stop on  
Glacier National  
Park's famous  
red bus tours

STORY BY BETH JUDY | PHOTOS BY TONY BYNUM







These pages: Norma Sangray's garden in full bloom.

The historic Glacier touring bus stops on its way out of the town of East Glacier toward Looking Glass Pass. The driver announces, "This is Norma's garden." The first impression is profusion. The garden boasts about 100 different perennials, the driver continues. It's an "alpine" garden, until recently covered with five feet of snow. They're welcome to go back and visit, he says, if Norma's there.

Joe Kendall, one "jammer," as drivers of Glacier Park's historic red buses are called, explains. "My guests are always interested in the people who live in this territory, and Norma is special."

The garden is just a strip of land between Norma and Dick Sangray's modest home and their neighbors. Norma isn't a professional gardener; in fact, this is her first garden. But when the 77-year-old and her husband retired from Brady and Browning to East Glacier, then bought the empty lot next to them in 1996, Norma looked out the window and said, "We're going to have weeds, lawn, or flowers." She chose flowers.

They brought in 13 truckloads of soil. In an album, two photos show bare dirt, rockwork and sparse plantings. On pink post-it notes beside them, Norma has written,

*I see in my future interesting winding paths through here with flowers where it's sunny enough . . . There are flowers that need very little sun.*

And,  
*Imagine how nice it would be, on a chilly morning, to walk through the flower garden with my fingers wrapped around that first cup of hot coffee.*

Norma talked with gardeners, read about soil and watering, kept files. And worked. Most days, she's in the garden. "My husband fixes breakfast and lunch. I get dinner. I've been known to get back out afterwards. He'll

ask, 'Want me to set up lights?'"

Delphiniums, Norma's favorite, tower above the rest. There are 51, of every color. After 14 years, Norma's wished-for "winding paths" are carpeted with thyme and Scottish moss; low-growing knotweed and rock cress flow over rockwork. Between the tall and the small grow masses of everything from echinacea, leatris, primrose, and yarrow to oriental lily, catmint, trollius and phlox. In the quiet, snowy winter, poring over catalogs, and in spring, at local nurseries, Norma thinks not just about flowers, but also about pretty foliage; she considers color, shape, height and succession of blooms, so there is never a lull.

"Alpine" doesn't describe the species in Norma's garden—few if any are the miniatures found on mountaintops; most aren't even native to Montana. But "alpine" does fit the growing conditions that Norma faces. Neighbor and fellow gardener Joann Flick explains, "We're Zone 4, technically, but it acts like Zone 3. We get hundred-mile winds, Alberta Clippers and Siberian Expresses. There's frost around Father's Day. Last June we had two significant snows. It's a crazy place to garden. Norma's really figured it out."

Surprisingly, flowers aren't Norma's main motivation. "I love people. I meet people from all over. They make me smile. Everyone has a story." Five feet tall, with silver-blond hair and direct blue eyes, Norma grew up furtherdown the Rocky Mountain front in Fairfield. She and Dick, high school sweethearts in Augusta, married 57 years ago. He ran a lumberyard and later, supervised maintenance of Browning schools. She raised their three children and worked part-time in medical settings.

As a kid Norma was shy, but learned "you don't make friends accidentally. If you want friends, you have to be friendly.

"In restaurants, I'll see a table of ladies who look like

they have a sense of humor and rush up and say, I'm so sorry I'm late! Or, at an automatic door I say, let me open that for you! I always speak to strangers. What's it cost?"

There are many to talk to in a town like East Glacier. In addition to her own garden, Norma tends a community plot near the railway underpass; in one year, thousands of tourists from around the world walk by. Norma takes the idea of ambassadorship seriously, aware that her actions, as well as her flowers, may make someone's visit to Glacier unforgettable.

But despite her stated motivation— attracting people, like bees—it's obvious the garden itself has seduced Norma. "Flowers are such a miracle. How do these colors come about?" She savors their names. "Catenanche. I planted it because I love the word." From their deck, she and Dick breathe the fragrance of oriental lilies, planted nearby for that reason. The garden is an oasis. In one corner, Dick built Norma a summerhouse with lattice walls. "I like to light a candle there," she says, "and get lost in my thoughts."

She brims with ideas and plans; "I'm going to move that" is a constant refrain. In July, she celebrates the delphiniums with a tea party—ladies only. "I've told men they can come, only they have to wear a dress and a hat. Some day one will surprise me," she adds, "and that will be fun." She peppers her garden with humor: well-placed gnomes; a "tumbleweed tree"—a tumbleweed wired to a gnarled branch; and the signature sign just inside the fence, "Garden of Weed'n."

Despite Norma's buoyancy, life was never a bowl of

cherries. Dick suffers from asbestosis. They lost one grown daughter to breast cancer. And telling her life story, Norma always mentions she was adopted. But the garden seems to soothe and restore her, ignite her curiosity and



sense of adventure and ground her in wonder.

Jammer Joe says the plants grow for Norma. "People will think I'm a nut, but the flowers respond to her care. It's her love of plants and of life. It affects everyone around her." **M**


A frequent contributor to *Montana Magazine*, Beth Judy lives in Missoula.

*Unique Elegance*  
*The beauty and distinction of the Yellowstone Art Museum will create unforgettable memories.*

**Hold your wedding at the Yellowstone Art Museum...**

- Indoor and outdoor settings
- Affordable, elegant accommodations
- Various catering options available

**Be sure to visit our Bridal Fair! Sunday, September 26, 2010**


**yellowstoneartmuseum**

401 N. 27th St. • Billings, MT  
256-6804 • [www.artmuseum.org](http://www.artmuseum.org)

